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MIAMI-DADE

Gym members are preparing their abs for crunch time

LADY OF AMERICA FITNESS CENTERS ACROSS MIAMI-DADE COUNTY ARE ENCOURAGING WOMEN TO TAKE PART IN AN AB CRUNCH CHALLENGE TO BENEFIT ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

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By YUDY PINEIRO
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Get a six-pack while giving back.

That's the idea behind a national fitness challenge that Lady of America Fitness Centers across the country are hosting with the goal to raise \$1 million for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, a center dedicated to finding cures and helping save children suffering from cancer or other catastrophic diseases.

The Ab Crunch Challenge, as it's being called, will be held March 29 at participating Lady of America, Ladies Workout Express and Workout Express locations. Participants will be asked to do ab crunches for up to an hour.

Until March 29, some locations are offering weekly crunch classes, also open to non-gym members, so they can build up strength and endurance to participate.

Salam Hachem, a personal trainer and registered dietitian who runs four Lady of America Fitness Centers in the West Kendall area, said she felt inspired to help St. Jude's.

"When you see the children, there's no way you don't want to help. I get goose bumps," she said. "They're a nonprofit. If we don't help them, who's going to help them?"

The crunch classes are free, but challenge participants are asked to raise money for St. Jude's by recruiting friends, relatives and colleagues to sponsor them in their effort.



CHRIS CUTRO/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Luana Sotomayor, foreground, and others make the crunch count by holding it in the up position during a class at the Lady of America gym in West Kendall. Lady of America members across Miami-Dade County are preparing of the Ab Crunch Challenge on March 29 to raise money for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.



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Tony Parziale, a New Jersey-area franchisee who holds the Guinness Book world record for performing more than 4,000 sit-ups in an hour, began the challenge at his Ladies Workout Express in 2006. It has since caught on nationwide.

Now, besides raising \$1 million, participating fitness centers are attempting another goal: to set the world record for the most crunches done at one time by a group.

Hachem is taking the challenge seriously, rallying women at her gyms to donate at least \$1 and asking those who participate in the Tuesday morning and evening classes to do the same.

While the top priority is to collect money, Hachem said, there are other benefits such as educating people about the importance of core fitness, eating right and ``obviously, it's encouraging our members to participate in classes like this."

On Tuesday, of the more than 20 women who took the ab crunch class at Hachem's Hammocks-area gym, few had made up their minds whether they would take part in the challenge.

But Michelle Heistand, a third-grade teacher who trains with Hachem, said she was up for the challenge -- and she's sure she can last the hour.

"If I can do two hours with Salam, I can do the challenge," she said.

Besides, Heistand said she'll do anything for a good cause, especially because it's just another excuse to stay fit and eat right.

Hachem also plans to participate in the challenge. She admits it's going to be tough to do ab crunches for an hour, but says she performs well under pressure.

"That day, I will participate and I will do it," she said.

If done right, Hachem said an hour should equal about 600 to 700 crunches.

And, as any good trainer will tell you, good form is everything when doing crunches. For ab crunch tips or to find out more about the challenge, visit www.ladyofamerica.com/abcrunch. To find a participating location, call 800-833-LADY (5239).

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